

Creative Assessment Across the Disciplines

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Creative Assessment Across the Disciplines

In 2009, when the Government raised the possibility of losing subjects such as creative writing in favour of more 'vocational' options, it became important to creative writing practitioners in universities to demonstrate its relevance in Higher Education. Many students are engaged on joint degree programmes and this led lecturers to consider a multidisciplinary approach. Students on programmes combined with English were required to use the short story as part of their assessment. This paper discusses how the use of creative writing has many benefits and not for the subject area of English only.

The first example of how creative writing was successfully integrated into the curriculum at Coventry University (CU) is from the joint BA Honours Degree in English and History. In 2008 the students on this degree were asked to write short stories related to a topic taught on a history module. The analysis of the students' feedback on this initiative illustrates that in order to achieve their story goals, students engaged with history on a deeper level than they would otherwise have done for the purposes of writing an essay. One student remarked to Alyson Morris - Course Director for English and Creative Writing and Project Leader for the creative assessment curricular intervention -:

My short story, *Broken Lungs*, enabled me to learn about aspects of history in fine-tuned detail. I focused on one soldier's experience in the trenches during WW1. Research allowed me to make the story as believable as possible, and helped with the elements left to my imagination (email communication, 2008).

The student's words resonate with Rossiter's observation that, 'Given the centrality of narrative in the human experience, we can begin to appreciate the power of stories in teaching and learning' (2002: 1). Using creative writing as a tool for learning is not a new concept. In many American universities, creative writing is being used as a method of learning in subject teaching. For example, Davis (1997: 240-245) has written of positive experiences while using stories with her Law and Bioethics students.

In 2010, it was suggested to one of the principal lecturers in the Law School at CU – Dr Steve Foster - that the short story could be used as an assessment tool in his subject area. Foster, who had always had a personal interest in fiction, was teaching Human Rights and Civil Liberties at level three. After gaining the approval of his then Head of Department, forty students were given the option to write either a case study or a short story for their first piece of coursework (Morris and Foster 2012).



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Drawing from Curtis' paper on creative writing pedagogy (2009:113), Foster presented his assignment brief as follows:

(A) Write a short story based around any legal dispute, which raises issues relating to human rights and civil liberties. It can be told from the perspective of the parties to the action or those affected by it. The story should take into account the following elements: plot and structure, characters and emotion, conflict, setting, and any appropriate theme and moral.

(B) Write a commentary reflecting the knowledge and understanding obtained through writing a short story, and discuss the moral issues raised. Cite and reference any appropriate sources (cases, statutes, books, articles, newspaper articles etc.). State what aspects of human rights and civil liberties influenced you, demonstrate a critical understanding and working knowledge of your subject area, and show how/if short story writing has increased your understanding.

To provide examples for the students, Morris and Foster wrote short stories based on well-known case studies. Morris's story, *A Right Charlie*, covered the case between HRH Prince Charles and *Associated Newspapers* on the publication of his 'private' diaries about the transfer of Hong Kong to Chinese control. However, Morris had no legal background to include the elements of the law needed for assessment, and secondly, was uncertain as how to avoid potential 'defamation of character'. Foster demonstrated the necessary inclusion of the law in his story *John Terry in Chamber's Shock Horror*, and *A Right Charlie* was used to demonstrate the basic short story elements. To avoid defamation, Foster required that the students include disclaimers with their story such as: 'this story is not based on true facts and the characters in it are fictional'.

Morris and Foster had expected that the students might not readily take the opportunity to write a short story, and thus offered publication of the best pieces in a special issue of the *Coventry Law Journal* in June 2011, and in *Coventry Words*, a magazine and website that gives students the opportunity to publish their creative writing work. However, contrary to the tutors' expectations, the response to the new creative writing brief was very positive. Students appeared to find the brief very motivating and many selected the new task even before they knew that there was an opportunity to publish their work. A meeting was arranged with the students who had chosen the short story option to discuss basic short story elements with the creative writing tutor. The students were given a number of published short stories to read that related in some respect to human rights. In order to start the writing



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process, students were asked to write a mini saga (a short story in 50 words) on their chosen case.

To acquire feedback from the students on using the short story method of assessment, Foster asked students to respond by email as to why they had chosen the creative writing assessment route and one student replied:

I chose to write a short story because it appealed to me - it was different to the usual essays. It was like answering a problem question, but this time from a different perspective. I wanted to focus on my character's everyday life, to show how initiating legal proceedings can be a daunting, even alien, prospect. I wanted to show the intimidation when entering legal offices and then to show how a solicitor would attempt to explain the legal issues without overwhelming a client (email communication, 2011).

The above student's words would appear to reflect well the following statement by Graeme Harper in his manual on creative writing (2006:164):

A creative piece constructs for the reader, and the writer, a hypothesis. 'What if?' is the question that drives the process of creative writing, and the reception of its results, e.g. What if this was my life? What if I had this opportunity? What if this disaster happened to me?

Harper's observation is also illustrated by another student's comment:

I had to go a little further than my typical research. I had to go inside the head of the participant in a case to convey the message through my story and construct my plot. Why does an individual believe he has such a right and why is it so important to him? How does the lack of his freedom of speech affect his life? I also had to consider the position of the prosecution, their motive, the right of others affecting freedom of speech. It pushed me to form a personal opinion – I was to give a voice to my characters, rather than give the opinions of others. I discovered a new aspect to the law, a less impersonal characterisation of it. I was given the opportunity of being a shadow claimant, defendant, judge and bystander, and I realised a lawyer is a key player in that relationship between law, the judiciary and society (email communication, 2011).

Foster and Morris offered to comment on the creative story draft by each student before the hand-in date. This often involved a face-to-face meeting where students discussed characters and situations. Students appeared to be very involved in their story-telling creative process and enthusiastic about the



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task. Another positive consequence of the collaboration discussed here consisted in knowledge sharing amongst staff from different departments, e.g. Morris learnt a great deal about human rights and civil liberties while Foster acquired a deeper knowledge of rhetorical storytelling devices and features. The law stories covered a wide range of legal issues including euthanasia, privacy and press freedom, terrorism and human rights, peaceful protest and the right to life. Students were assessed for character build and conflict, story plot and structural pace, theoretical knowledge and understanding of human rights and civil liberties, the quality of their research and of their information retrieval and referencing, and the ability to evaluate and apply principles of the law to a hypothetical scenario.

It is important to note that Foster was more concerned with knowledge and understanding of the law, rather than story writing ability. People have an inherent and subjective knowledge of what a story is, and whether a story works, through reading fiction. This curricular intervention was about the experience of using storytelling to enhance knowledge and to reveal an understanding of the law, not simply about writing ability. Some students found aspects of short story writing more difficult than anticipated. One student observed (email communication 2011):

It was challenging to write a story on the sensitive issue of a prisoner's rights. I was more at ease drafting the legal aspect of the story and soon realised that story writing really is a labour of love. It was time-consuming, sometimes frustrating, but most of all, liberating. I was glad to have had this unique experience to explore my writing skills beyond the standard style of legal writing.

However, students also found that writing a short story enabled them to explore humanistic issues which led to a deeper understanding of law. Another student commented (email communication, 2011):

Focusing on the emotions of the claimant allowed me greater insight into the legal issues presented to court, in order to protect the claimant's husband from prosecution if he were to assist in ending her life.

The process of combining legal issues with short story writing enabled students to explore both disciplines in a new way, and this would appear to substantiate what Harper claims (2006:164-165):

The creative writer inserts themselves into the interpretative position; empathetically, providing a way for the reader to follow through a speculation, effectively alongside the writer themselves. This makes



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works of creative writing source models; they provide experimental opportunities and analogies and might even determine how certain, more or less universal, laws might or might not look.

Foster noted a number of positive outcomes. The average mark for the stories was higher than for the formal case notes, and significantly higher than for previous cohorts. The students displayed tremendous enthusiasm, taking every opportunity to gain feedback and suggestions for corrections before submission. Most showed remarkable imagination in constructing the stories and in developing characters - skills not necessarily evident in their previous work and in their approach to the subject or their classroom contribution. Also, they were able to express themselves more clearly and were more confident in this medium. They appeared to have a much deeper understanding and appreciation of their chosen case than Foster had found in the past. The two lecturers involved noticed moreover that dealing with law issues through story telling enabled students to better understand troublesome law concepts (Morris and Foster 2012). Foster's general experience up to this point was that students did not like reading cases and found difficulty in identifying and explaining their significance. It appeared that taking control of the case for their own purposes led to a much greater appreciation of the legal and human issues in the case.

Apart from the obvious strengths of this assessment method – it appeared that the students were learning more about the law and were demonstrating understanding of fundamental law concepts at a deeper level – the project illustrated that student empowerment is a key motivator in using creative writing as a learning tool. Rossiter (2002:2) claims that 'narrative is a fundamental structure of human meaning making... a powerful medium of learning, development, and transformation' and Moon (2010:101) argues that the use of stories in HE enhances critical thinking and learning.

One student found that writing a story exposed him to 'researching and acknowledging *spicy details* generally considered trivial by law aficionados and normally overlooked by students in their reading'(personal communication 2011). He developed an appreciation for the 'life element' in his chosen case, and found a deeper understanding of the complex intertwining between the rigours of adjudication and human sentiments. He also observed that (email communication 2011):

Overall, researching not only case transcripts and notes but likewise tabloid descriptions and short bibliographies of my main characters forged the key to getting into their heads. I am grateful for having had this experience.



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This collaboration confirms that the art and craft of creating writing, apart from being a natural, productive part of an English degree, can be utilised as a learning and assessment tool in different subject areas. Because of its success, the *Law and the Short Story* project is currently being disseminated to other subjects across the whole of the university. In 2013-2014 Morris started to work with the Department of Health and Life Sciences in collaboration with her colleague Tim Kelly (Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing) to undertake a project similar to the one carried out with law. Since then, 300 nursing students have been involved in writing short stories for coursework, again with positive outcomes similar to those achieved in the collaboration with Foster. In a meeting arranged to discuss feedback on the short story assessment in 2014, Fazilah Twining, Senior Lecturer for Mental Health Nursing, stated:

It is really clear from their stories that they have understood the significant issues about values in nursing and professional conduct. Most of the stories took a good nurse vs. bad nurse approach. The stories have also demonstrated the students' ability to problem solve as they have written about a dilemma and explored the different solutions.

At the time of writing (April 2015) more faculty members (in Geography and Mafia Studies) have become involved in this project and the use of creative writing assessment is spreading across the disciplines at Coventry University.

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